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The Characteristics and Dynamics of Crime Gun Markets: Implications for Supply-Side Focused Enforcement Strategies*

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to assist law enforcement agencies in analyzing the dynamics of illegal markets in firearms by using accessible incident level data on crime gun traces and to develop problem-solving interventions designed to help enforce laws against illegal selling, possession and use of firearms. The study is divided into three parts: an overview of what is known about crime-related gun markets and their federal regulation; an analysis of crime gun trace data and the use of this information-related resource to focus law enforcement investigations and strategies; and an assessment of the potential value of crime-gun information to identify violent offenders and improve community safety.

Our overview of illegal gun markets research leads us to conclude that well-focused supply-side enforcement can be used to good effect on point sources of illegal firearms transfers (such as federally licensed dealer knowingly engaged in the sale of firearms to juveniles or other prohibited persons) and diffuse sources of illegal firearms transfers (such as straw purchasers) of new guns originating from retail outlets. These analyses simply document that a significant share of guns that are recovered from violent offenders and other prohibited persons could be affected by supply-side interventions that focus on guns recently diverted from retail sources. Indeed, multiple known sources of illegal guns, ranging from residential gun thefts to sales by unlicensed sellers at gun shows and elsewhere, need to be addressed.

Our analysis of crime gun information focuses on one aspect of the illegal gun market that holds immediate promise for supply-side enforcement: close-to-retail diversions of guns that are illegal under federal law. It makes use of information about crime guns recovered by federal, state and local law enforcement agencies in 1999 that were traced by ATF to retail dealers and purchasers. First we describe the character and nature of crime-related gun markets at the national level and within seven selected cities. Second, we used these data to identify patterns among actors associated with the illegal market in firearms. Third, based on our analyses of the dynamics of illegal markets in firearms and patterns among actors associated with the illegal market in firearms, we identify 11 indicators of gun trafficking. These indicators can be constructed from available trace information and used to assist law enforcement in assessing the investigative potential of particular gun traces. They can enable law enforcement officials to focus resources on the parts of the illegal market in firearms involved in diversion of guns from federally licensed retail sources and/or private citizens to violent offenders, juveniles and other prohibited persons.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Current debate about proper measures to reduce illegal access to guns, places insufficient emphasis on the fact that for every six firearms used in crime only one was legally obtained (Reiss and Roth 1993). Yet, two populations of most concern to law enforcement, adult career criminals and juveniles, are legally prohibited from purchasing handguns nearly everywhere in

